

OE and ME *cunte* in place-names

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Despite much discussion of the modern word, mysteries remain, both linguistic and sociological. Is it native OE, or borrowed from ON? Has the modern taboo always existed? I consider that the place-name evidence can contribute to these questions. However, there has not yet been a convenient corpus of all the surviving material. OED cites the street-name *Gropecuntelane* from Oxford c.1230 as its earliest record, but to evaluate this we need to know the frequency of occurrence and dates of all such names. The aim of this paper is to assemble the corpus (Figure 2), and make some general observations.

A relation to Latin *cunnus* is very doubtful for reasons of historical phonology. *Cunnus* perhaps shares a stem with *culus*; the latter is recorded in Britain in a Roman-period graffito from Leicester: EQUA G | ELLA CVLO, a curse probably meaning ‘mare G, that arse’ (Wilson and Wright 1964: 182).¹ The Latin terms *uerētrum* and *pudendus*, both used for ‘genitalia’ are contradictory when taken literally, since they are built on the stems of *uereor* ‘to be in awe of’ and *pudeō* ‘to make ashamed’.² They are thus circumlocutions, an interesting fact in itself, and probably reflect an ambiguity of attitude which has always existed. The oft-cited ON *kunta* is actually recorded twice only, as the by-name of a certain Rōgnvaldr who appears in *Heimskringla* and the Fornmanna sagas (Lind 1920–1: 226). The meaning is deduced from that of the same word in more recent Scandinavian dialects. A runic inscription does in fact record the word *kunt*, but this is probably an error for *knut(r)* (Petersen 2002: s.n. *Knūtr*). Given that German *kunte* is grammatically feminine (DWb: s.v. *kunte*), and the fact that the unique recorded OE form *cuntan* (discussed below) has a weak ending, ON *kunta* probably belongs to the weak *-on* declension (of the saga type) and is thus feminine, and the OE form is probably *cunte* (fem.) rather than *cunta* (masc.).

The existence of numerous by-names recorded in the medieval period would argue against a taboo operating then: for example *Clawecuncte* in the Winton Domesday (von Feilitzen 1976: 210),³ and names such as *Clevecunt*, *Cruskunt*, *Fillecunt*, *Twyhecunt* and *Sittebid’cunte*; these are discussed in Reaney (OES: 294–5), McClure (1981: 98), and Postles (1999: 119–20, 125).

Similar personal names occurs in *Bele Wydecunthe* 1328 (SibEst: 67) and in the field-name *Bluthercuntesaker* c.1289 (Sib3: 108).

Other ‘rude words’ recorded in place-names include *fockynggroue* in Bristol 1373 (Coates 2007); OE *ears* occurs with euphemistic alteration in Ashgrove Farm (W), which was (*to*) *erse grafan* 955 (PN W: 208); OE *buttuc* occurs in the charter S 977 of Cnut of c.1022: *ofþam wege on þa buttucas. ofþam buttucon on þone broc*; ME *pisse* occurs in *Pisswelle* 13th (Underwood 2008: 36); OE *bealluc* or ME *ballok* occurs in two Derbyshire names: Bullock Low in Hartington, *Balloklow* 1415 (PN Db: 370), and the lost *Ballocborn* 1275 (PN Db: 342), and non-topographically in Sandford Orcas (< OF *Oriescuilz* ‘golden ballocks’ (PN Do 3: 389)). These examples are sufficient to establish that we should not be surprised to find *cunte*. Though *cunte* and *counte* are common ME spellings for count (nobleman), this term is very rare in English place-names; cf. the affixes *Le Cunte* 1252, *le Counte* 1324, *Comitis* 1451 of Swaffham Bulbeck and S~ Prior (PN C: 133–4). The long stem vowel would have distinguished it in speech. Countesthorpe (Lei; Watts (CDEPN)) and Counterslip (Bristol; Smith (PN G1 3: 87)) are from ‘countess’, but Countisbury (PN D 62) is not.⁴

Modern discussions have concentrated on the use in swearing (Allan and Burridge 2006; Montagu 1967; Sagarin 1962), and are sometimes influenced by feminist theory (Muscio 1998). For an interesting male analogue, see Cooper (2008). For the French *con*, see Rey (DHLF: s.v. con), where it is claimed that a taboo has operated since the mid-17th century.

I now discuss the individual place-names. Names printed in italic do not survive on the modern map.

cuntan heale: a charter of King Edgar (S 683, AD 960) refers to a place in Bishopstoke (Hampshire) called (*to*) *cuntan heale* (dative). Another charter (S 360, AD 900) in giving bounds for the estate of Durley apparently refers to the same place, but this charter has been shown to be a later forgery (Brooks 1982; Miller 2001: 25). The location, as confirmed by the detailed study of Currie (1995), must be near SU 514187, next to the East Horton golf course. There is no notable topographical feature here, but two small streams do meet at an elongated field, and this might in some way be responsible for the name (Figure 1).

Grundy (1924: 82–6) avoids giving a translation, but just writes “... hollow”; for Brooks (1982), the meaning is ‘cunt-hollow’; for Currie (1995: 105) the meaning is ‘Cuntan’s hollow’, a grammatical impossibility; while for Miller (2001: 25), it is ‘cuntish hollow’; on page 233, he states “This word occurs in Old English only in the phrase *cuntan healh*”. This is thus the only recorded pre-Conquest use of the word.⁵



Figure 1: Durley, Hampshire, with the site of *cuntan halh* in the centre.

Gropecuntlane: This street-name is recorded in about twenty places; all have now become Grape Lane or similar, or have been completely lost.

- Oxford (O): *Gropecuntelane* c.1230, now Grove Passage and Magpie Lane (PN O: 40)
- Northampton (Nth): *Groppecuntelane* 1274 (PN Nth: 8)
- London: *Gropecontelane* 1279, *Groppecounte Lane* 1276 (1279) (SNCL: 164)
- Wells (So): *Gropecuntelane* c.1260–1333 (Scrase n.d. [1989]: 105)
- Shrewsbury (Sa): *Gropecountelane* 1304, now Grope Lane (PN Sa 4: 5)
- Great Yarmouth (Nf): *Gropecuntelane* 1299; last recorded 1514 (PN Nf 2: 32)
- Norwich (Nf): *Gropecuntelane* 1305; *Turpis Vicus* 1333; now Opie St. (PN Nf 1: 122)
- Windsor (Brk): *Gropecountelane* 1315 (PN Brk: 29)
- Stebbing (Ess): *Gropecountelane* c.1325 (PN Ess: 457)
- York (YW): *Grapcunt Lane* 1328–9, *Gropcunt Lane* 1376, now Grape Lane (SNCL: 164; PN YE: 289)
- Reading (Brk): *Gropequeyntelane* 14th (PN Brk: 172)

- Cambridgeshire (C): an unlocated *Gropecuntlane* 1472 is given by Reaney (PN C: 337)
- Bristol (Gl): *Gropecountlane* 1480 (later Hallier's Lane, later and now Nelson Street (*ex inf.* R. Coates) (Worcestre 2001: §46). This is just *Gropelane* in the same source at §373, §375, and §411–12.
- Shareshill (St): *Gropcuntlane* 1513 (PN St: 119)
- Grimsby (L): *Gropecunt Lane* 1529 (PN L 5: 77–8)
- Newcastle (Nb): *Grapecuntlane* 1588 (Holt and Baker 2001: 212)
- Banbury (O): *Gropecunt lane* n.d. (Holt and Baker 2001: 210)

Note that we also have:

- Hereford: *Gropelane* 1368 (Holt and Baker 2001: 209)
- Hedon: *Grape Lane* 1432, *Grape Gate* 1840 (PN YE: 40)
- Shaftesbury: *Cropelane* 1475 (PN Do 3: 148)
- Chipping Barnet: *Gropelane* 15th? (PN Hrt: 71)
- Peterborough: *Gropelane* 1500 (PN Nth: 225)
- Wareham: *Groupe, Groop St* 18th (PN Do 1: 155)
- Worcester: *Grope lane* n.d. (PN Wo: 23; SNCL: 164)

There are modern Grape Streets or Lanes in Leeds, Leicester, Halifax, Keighley, Durham, Whitby, and Pocklington, which may be suspected of having the same origin, but data on early spellings is lacking. For Grape Street in Leicester, Cox (PN Lei 1: 38) speculates about a name from an inn. A discussion of the geography of some of these streets and a possible connection to prostitution has been given by Holt and Baker (2001).

We note the earliest instance in Oxford, and the others are concentrated in major ecclesiastical centres that would be likely destinations of Oxford-educated clerics (London, Norwich, Wells, York, Bristol); thus I suggest the name originates as academic slang. Another monogenetic street-name is probably *Finkle Street*; Coates (1995) proposes that it spread from an original in York. There is a slight complication here due to the existence of OE *grōp*, *grēop*, with the meaning 'drain, ditch'. Sweet (OET: 98) gives *scrobibus groepum* (dat. plur.), and Sweet (OET: 73) has *latrina groepe atque ductus cloaca*; that is, a sewer in the modern sense. A specialized meaning was 'a central channel for urine in a cow-shed'. Furthermore, *cuniculum* also had the meaning 'sewer' in medieval Latin and perhaps here the *cun-* element provided a basis for punning. This word has numerous dialect derivatives — grip, grape, greap, gripe, groop, grup, grupe etc. (EDD: s.vv. grip, groop), and has been claimed as the origin of *Group St* in Wareham 18th (PN Do 1: 155)

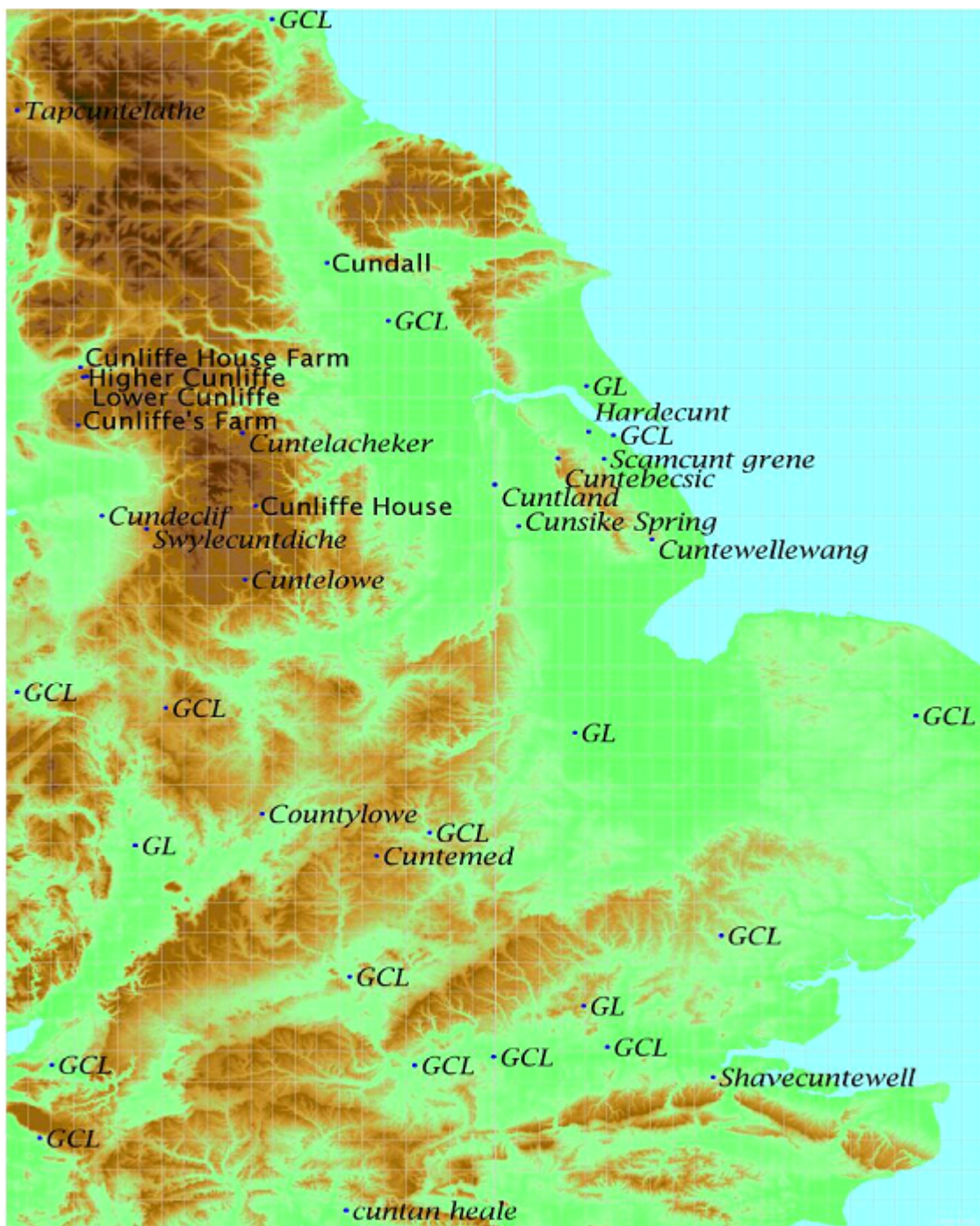


Figure 2: Location of names considered in the text.
GCL = Gropecuntlane, GL = Gropelane.

Cropelane 1475 in Shaftesbury (PN Do 3: 148). It seems a remote possibility that the streets now called Grope or Grape Lane were named from a ditch in the middle of the road, and that the addition of a middle syllable to give *Gropecuntelane* was a jocular alteration of this. But this is very unlikely to have happened independently about twenty times, making it much more probable that every *Gropelane* is a ‘cleaned-up’ version of a *Gropecuntelane*. The gradual ‘cleaning-up’ process resulting in modern Grove Lane is well illustrated in the case of Wells: Scrase (n.d. [1989]: 105) records the following dates for former names of the present Union Street:

Gropecuntelane c.1260–1333

Grope Lane c.1280–1835

Grove Lane 1820–65

The Parisian *Rue de Poile-Con* (Géraud 1837: 215) is possibly a punning alteration of an inn-name *Pélican*, the name in later records. The meaning of *poile* would presumably be ‘de-louse’ (AND: s.n. poiller), and we may compare *Swylecunt dyche* below. Allan and Burridge (2006: 52) are probably wrong to claim a Cunte St in Bristol, and certainly wrong to associate the word with Cunetio, Kennett, and conduit.

Cuntelowe (Parwich, Db), Hy3 (1216–72) (PN Db: 405).

Countylowe (Hatton, Wa); *Cuntelowe* 1221; Countylowe 1840 (PN Wa: 328, 368).

The names are apparently identical and probably denote small hills with clefts. There is little hope of identifying the site of the Parwich feature in a very hilly area disturbed by mining. The same name perhaps occurs in the Scottish *Countelowe* 17th, *Cuntelait* 1691, recorded in the old earldom of Moray (Barrow 2008: 12), though Simon Taylor (personal communication), suggests that it is rather of Celtic origin.

Cunliffe. There are five occurrences of this name. Perhaps only the first two are originally place-names, and the others are from personal names (the WW1 memorial at Rishton records two Cunliffes). *Cundeclif* below is directly comparable.

- Lower Cunliffe (Rishton, La; SD 712307). These early forms are given in Ekwall (PN La: 73) and Kenyon (1984–5: 46): *de Kuntecliue* (*Cumbecliue*) 1246, *de Cuntecliue* n.d., *de Cundeclive* 1258, 1274, *de Cunteclyue* 1276, *de Condeclyve* 1288, *de Cundeclif* 13th, *de Cundeclif* 1277, 1388.

- Higher Cunliffe (Bank Hey, La; SD 701305).
- Cunliffe House Farm (Langho, La; SD 693341).
- Cunliffe's Farm (Bolton, La; SD 685125).
- Cunliffe House (Outseats, near Bamford, Db; SK 216822; PN Db: 157).

An OE personal name *Cunda* is recorded once as the name of a bishop in the Mercian charter S 190 (AD 836). This is possibly a short form of one of the common names such as *Cundbeald*, *Cundbeorht*, *Cundhelm* etc., and is a continental form corresponding to OE *Cūð-*, and so expected to be rare in Britain. Alternatively, it might be short for *cundigeorn*, a British name found in the Durham *Liber Vitae* (OET: 163). Ekwall considers the place-name Cunliffe to possibly contain *Cunda*, but there are several spellings with *-t-*, and therefore other origins should not be excluded. Ekwall further states: “‘Cunnus diaboli’ was a monkish name for a hollow in a rock through which people in Yorkshire used to crawl to be healed of sickness”. No authority for this claim is given; I have traced its source as follows. In Higgins (1878: 346) it is stated:

In India there are various clefts in the ground or rocks, (these are all nabi or navels,) into which devotees go, and from which when they come out they are regenerated or born again. There is a large one in Nepaul called Guhya-sthan used for this purpose. Here is a curious mixture of Greek and English found in India — the stan or stone of Γαῖα, Gaia the earth. There is a similar opening in several of the Celtic monuments of the British Isles, and particularly in the rocks at Brimham, near Harrowgate in Yorkshire, a place formerly much used by the Druids. See Celtic Druids [i.e. Higgins (1829: 225–6), where the same place is called Bramham]. If the hole were too small for the body, as Col. Wilford says, they put a hand or a leg in, and WITH FAITH *it did as well*. The early Christians called those things *Cunni diaboli*, and from the former of these words came the vulgar appellation for the membrum fæmineum in England.

The unscientific nature of Higgins' writing will be apparent; I view these unsourced and unverifiable statements as almost worthless. His last etymology is wrong, and his ignorance is further displayed by a footnote claiming a similar anatomical origin for *Penis-tone*. Nevertheless this passage was cited by Liebrecht (1879: 398); Liebrecht was in turn cited by Nyrop (1890: 16); and Nyrop by Ekwall (PN La: 73). A very dubious and third-hand opinion has thus ended up in a reputable book.

Lower Cunliffe is at the base of a long straight ridge which is cut by several channels issuing from springs. There is also a spoil-heap from a mine

(Figure 3). A particularly marked wooded gully immediately above the farmhouse may be the origin of the name.

Consideration of this name is complicated by the apparent existence of a variant *cunliff* of *cundiff*, *cundreth* ‘conduit, sewer’ (EDD: s.v. *cundy*). The word is either a direct descendant of ‘conduit’ with parasitic *-r-*, later altered to *-l-*, or a compound with OE *rīð*, ME *rithe* ‘stream’.



Figure 3: Lower Cunliffe (Lancashire), showing the two wooded gullies, with a spoil-heap partly obscuring the left-hand one.

Shauecuntewelle, in or near Singlewell, Kt: *de Savetuntewell* 1275, *Shauecuntewelle* 1321, last noted 1350. The name is discussed by Wallenberg (1934: 101), who does not come to a conclusion. The name may be topographical (as *Cuntewelle(wang)* below), or possibly it is a site of humiliating punishment of women. There is further discussion of related folkloric issues in Jones (2002: 251).

Cundeclif in Nether Knutsford Ch: *Cundeclif* c.1300, *Cunteclyf* 1358. The name is discussed by Dodgson (PN Ch 2: 76); Dodgson says this is a surname in the Knutsford district, and thus it is not certain that we have an original toponym here. Cunliffe (discussed above) is the same name.

Cuntebecsic Hy3 (1216–72) (Caistor, Li; PN L 2: 93).

Hardecunt Hy3 (1216–72) (Stallingborough, Li; PN L 2:276).

Cuntewellewang 1317 (Dexthorpe, Li; Owen 1996: 101).

Cuntesik 1348–9 (Nettleham, Li; PN L 7 (forthcoming)), *Cunn Sike Drain* 1781, *Cunsike Spring* 1824.

Cuntland 1384 (Hemswell, Li; PN L 6: 182).

Scamcunt grene 1457 (Brigsley, Li; PN L 4: 64–5, PN L 5: xvii).

This is a remarkable isolated cluster of six names in Lincolnshire. In most cases no exact feature be precisely identified, but a topographical interpretation is likely for all of them. *Cuntewellewang* in Dexthorpe is surely a description of the narrow wooded valley at TF 406 716 (Figure 4). Though no early record of any of these places survives, an origin in the Scandinavian word is very probable, and this group might be considered as evidence that ME *cunte* derives from Scandinavian. The generics in these names are ON *bekkr* ‘stream’, *sík* ‘ditch, channel’, and *vangr* ‘field’. The use of *cunte* as a generic in *Hardecunt* is unique. Cameron, Field, and Insley (PN L 5: xvii) suggest that the last name may contain ON *skammr* ‘short’; ME *sc(h)ame* ‘shame’ seems another possibility, though the spelling *scam* without *-h-* is unusual for a date as late as 1457. We may compare here OE *scamlim* ‘limb of shame’, a gloss for *Ueretrum* (Quinn 1956), and modern German *Schamlippen*, Dutch *schaamlippen*.



Figure 4: *Cuntewellewang*, Dexthorpe.

Cuntelacheker 1307 in Fulstone (PN YW 2: 242). Presumably from **læcc* ‘stream’, and *kjarr* ‘marsh’. There are narrow wooded gullies in this region (SE 177098).

Swylecunt dycbe in Macclesfield: *le Swylecontdich* 1396, *Swylecuntliche* 1397; last recorded 1620. The name is discussed in Dodgson (PN Ch 1: 120, 3: xiv), where *Swillinditch* is located from a Tithe Award map to “110[SJ]-907736, between Holly Bank Fm and Chester Rd, west of Clowes St”. Note Cock Wood SJ 882733.

Tapcuntlathe 1393 in Penrith (PN Cu: 233). Presumably from ME *tap(pen)* ‘touch, tap’, and *hlaba* ‘barn’.

Cuntemedewey, *Cuntemed* no date, AD v. 1, p. 219, item B.20, in Adstone (Nth).

Doubtful cases

Cundall. *Cundel* DB (PN YN: 181). Smith suggests “from the OE name *Cunda* or . . . the ODan pers. name *Kundi* or from the OWScand by-name *Kunta*”. The first option probably occurs in Condicote (Gloucestershire) *Cundicotan* c.1052 (PN Gl 1: 216) and the last is not likely. There is nevertheless a topographical curiosity here — a wedge of land projects into the junction of the River Swale and the Cod Beck at Topcliffe Manor (SE 413748), at which is Maiden Bower and Cock Lodge (Figure 5). The name Maiden Bower occurs as a calque on *virginalis thalamus* ‘the womb of the virgin Mary’,⁶ so perhaps several related anatomical references occur here.



Figure 5: Cundall (Yorks NR) in the 1856 OS 10,560 map.
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Quainton. This is considered “somewhat difficult” in Mawer and Stenton (PN Bk: 108); the authors prefer a derivation from a personal name in *Cwēna*-. However, the DB spelling is *Chentone*. DB spells names with etymological /kw/- with *Qu*-, *Qv*-, *Cu*-, *Ku*-, or *Hu*-, but spellings in *Che*- and *Chi*- correspond to original /ke/- and /ki/- (Keelby, Keighley, Kercott, Kildale, Kinscote, and many other examples). Whatever the ultimate origin, I suggest influence from the neighbouring hill which contains a large cleft, so that the name now contains the Chaucerian euphemistic alteration *quaint*. The diphthong /ei/ first appears 1235 and then persists.

Hungery Cunt. This occurs on Roy’s military map of Scotland⁷ of c.1750 in Cleish parish, Kinrossshire, at NT 134979. However, I suspect this is a copyist’s error for the recurring derogatory name *Hungeremout* ‘Hunger ’em out’, which is discussed by Simon Taylor (2008: 277, 355).

Conclusion

The *Middle English Dictionary* (MED) has eight quotations for the word *cunte* from the period 1325–1500, starting from the *Proverbs of Hendyng*, extending to medical treatises, vocabularies, to Chaucer. There are perhaps not many more than these eight in total. If so, the place-name corpus is much larger and therefore of considerable value for its linguistic evidence. The remaining questions belong to the field of sociolinguistics, and I leave these to better qualified persons.

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Notes

1. Cf. also OF *coille*, *coillon* ‘testicle’.
2. Cf. the 13th century gloss *pudibenda* huntuse choses ‘shameful things’ (TLL: 2, 67).
3. von Feilitzen attributes the final *c* in *cuncte* to dittography.
4. The German *Cuntz* is of no relevance here, being a hypocoristic from Conrad (earlier *Kuonrad*).
5. Could there be a pun in Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginate* (Lapidge and Rosier 1985) line 1159, *Mellea tunc roseis haerescunt labra labellis* ‘the honeyed lips cling [“her is *cunte*”??] to his rosy lips’? This might seem so far-fetched as to be not worth considering, but Aldhelm is noted for his very obscure word-play. Could the mysterious *feðer cuncan siðe* of S 872 (Kelly 1998: no. 21, pp. 91–5) contain an error for the same word? Cf. (*in*) *Winceburnan* for Winterbourne (S 1217).
6. For example, in the *Liber de infantia sancti Edmundi* of Gaufridi de Fontibus (Thompson 1977).
7. <http://geo.nls.uk/roy/>.

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